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# I, Charlotte, Comme Il Faut

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NORGE ESPINOSA

*I, Charlotte, comme il faut*  
(a dramatic poem)

*People interested her almost not at all, no matter what sex or age they were.  
Most of the time, when she spoke, she seemed to wake up startled from a day-  
dream, which in some other period might have led her to become a mystic, but  
in her case was political.*

—On Charlotte Corday, from an anonymous biography

Your Honor here on my face  
Are the marks still fresh of my first murder  
Which unfortunately will also be my last  
Since I know history well and I respect it  
I am happy to have saved France  
From such a terrible monster  
And I'm proud of the thrust of my knife  
Which may seem to you like an inimical act  
Reason enough for the verdict to come swiftly  
And the sentence and later my rest  
Next to Brutus in the Elysian Fields of my imagination  
I will answer right away so please be patient  
You should know that in April of the present year  
I sent my father a long letter saying  
I was going to England in exile fleeing poverty  
And the corruption at the heart of this country  
And yet I begged for his blessing  
Besides asking him to watch over my footsteps  
A prudent request at a time like this  
Words that can only aspire to draw him away  
From guilt and the mocking of drunkards  
Who follow the one killed without remorse  
Because I was truly sick of the "Terror" and had decided  
That if all the men of this land were so worthless  
It was necessary to exterminate the guilty ones  
Above all the one who had cut off two thousand heads

And that is how I came to Paris on July eleventh  
Checking in right away at the Providence Hotel  
A place which had been recommended to me  
And where I was well treated  
Because the crisis had not yet stripped my countrymen  
Of the last of their goodness and in the ruins we were equal  
Complying in a more or less coherent fashion  
With the sacred objectives of the revolution  
My plan to kill him in public  
At the Federation Parade at army headquarters  
Which was to be held for him and his comrades  
There I would pull out a knife and bring him to justice  
Prepared for the fanatical crowd to tear me to pieces  
Killing me at once without even knowing my name  
But the monster no longer appeared in public  
No longer went out because his illness  
Had forced him into seclusion his cracked skin  
Itched more and more and he had to stay at home  
Sitting in the bathtub soaping his ass  
Twenty-four hours straight writing and rewriting  
The names of those who were to be executed  
Erased from our history by the stroke of a pen  
The privilege of a tyrant about to die  
Shit I cried out but I didn't give up  
Somehow I needed to enter his house  
Which was guarded by a fat cook  
A boy a policeman and a foul-smelling maid  
Three times I tried your Honor  
Three times I tried to cross that threshold  
And three times I heard those bitches  
Covered with scarlet insignia curse  
Screaming more than me saying things  
I will not repeat out of respect for your Honor  
I wrote two letters to Marat explaining to him  
That I wanted to bring him the names of the conspirators  
In a horrible plot to kill him the leper  
Squashing him like a toad or a black basilisk  
In his own filthy tub of mangy water

Letters I had taken up to him  
While he cried Simone don't beat me  
She looked at me with fear  
She who long ago had sacrificed her virginity  
Not exactly for the good of the revolution  
And then I was facing him your Honor  
Finally I had before me that naked chest  
Into which I would plunge the knife I was concealing  
In my girdle here in my womb let me stop here  
For a moment to remember it does me good  
As if a sweet wind were blowing over me  
What mortals have called happiness  
What the revolution calls duty fulfilled  
Let me describe for you with a wealth of details  
How I killed him I'm giving you the exclusive story  
Gentlemen of the jury don't deny this last wish  
Of a young murderess who at this very moment  
Inspires mysterious feelings of pity in you  
I took four hours to pick out the knife  
Before you on the floor by the bathtub  
Four whole hours going from booth to booth  
At the market at the Palais Royal searching  
Without noticing the cloth the perfume the dresses  
Which a young woman of my beauty should have noticed  
Two francs it cost just two francs  
Which is the precise cost of immortality itself  
I'm much younger than any of us imagines  
I liked its white handle its menacing air  
Pure death inscribed on it by an innocent craftsman  
And as if in a dream I handed it to the vendor  
Who praised it saying it was wonderful for fruit  
Not for a human chest the ignoramus didn't know  
How soon that delicate blade would be plunged  
Into the darkest heart in all of France  
The heart of France itself  
To cut out the vile worm gnawing at him  
It was painful your Honor to see that man stripped  
Of his august robe barely covered with a dirty sheet

That Simone had refused to wash  
The bath water was red I remember  
Because I was disappointed  
I dreamed of seeing blood  
Staining everything the water the walls  
My face nothing like that took place  
That man made me feel sorry and I cried as I had  
In Caen when I saw one of my few friends die  
Simone found me there when she tried to interrupt us  
She fled at the sight of my tears begging pardon  
Leaving me alone with him once and for all  
While he feverishly copied each name  
Muttering over and over executed executed  
As if he thought of himself as God  
A proud sinner a killer the great monster  
Without even asking about the causes or motives  
Of the vile plot to eliminate him  
I am not a believer your Honor  
But I swear I heard a bell tolling  
Although it was getting dark and surely  
They could only ring death knells in those horrible days  
I am not a believer respectful gentlemen of the jury  
But I understood those bells were warning me  
The time had come and I raised my hand  
This way the way I'm raising it now  
Once again raising the knife to plunge it  
Without pity without shame without any qualms  
Into the filthy body of the one I hated  
Sinking it into his throat the end of the revolution  
Your Honor you must forgive me  
But in truth I cannot find the exact words  
To describe for you in a vivid way  
The expression on his face the horrid mask  
He wore in the final moment of his life  
He who suffered  
The man I killed the only one the wretch  
Because at that moment his face was also  
The face of everyone he had had executed

And in a succession as rapid as it was horrible  
I saw France before me the whole of France guillotined  
I would have stabbed him again in my fury  
Had he not howled with a voice that was not his  
But the voice of hell itself  
*A moi ma chere ami*  
Which made me freeze the water  
Stained with his corruption spilled on my robe  
Leaving me wet and slimy  
From an empty body that was no longer Marat  
Falling slowly carefully in a beautiful  
Gesture the most daring artists would copy  
This way lean a little more to the right a little more  
Slowly Jean Paul lean your head  
Don't tighten your arm hold the pen like this  
Your face should be ecstatic with the light on it  
So that David our most dynamic painter  
Can give the scene an exalted air  
Let him do what he has learned to do in this time  
Of your death another passage of sparkling glory  
Another splendid page of the revolution  
From which they will never be able to erase me  
Look at my knife all of you take a good look at me  
And celebrate this humble fine-featured maiden  
Whom they will call the new Judith greater than Brutus  
The brave schoolteacher horrible at the moment of her death  
Before my face is buried under the waves  
Of marble we call history  
See my flashing eyes the flush of my cheeks  
The subtle gesture with which I say good-bye  
To the frightful corpse shrouded in water  
That is Marat dead that is Robespierre dead  
Dead like Napoleon and Louis XIV and the Dauphin  
Like Marie Antoinette and Casanova and the gendarmes  
Who took Joan of Arc the cross  
So she could kiss it as the flames swept over her  
Dead like Hector like Julius Caesar like Charlemagne  
Like Galileo like Leonardo

Like Dreyfus dead like Rodin and Rilke  
Like Bertolt Brecht before the ruined ghettos  
Dead like Shakespeare and Dante in the mystical rose  
That elevates us that is perfection itself  
Dead as all the victims of all the wars in history  
Dead like honor like dead leaders  
Cities like Athens Jerusalem  
London Vienna Berlin St. Petersburg Warsaw  
Like the statues dead  
Dead like their heroes whom I see now  
In the dirty water of your silence oh Marat  
You who wrote will the people's friend  
Always have to play the role of Cassandra for you  
As if you guessed as if you knew  
No one would ever pay attention to your cry  
No one would ever notice your gesture  
Dead beautiful Marat my most sublime masterpiece  
And now my time  
Your Honor there is nothing more to say  
Just that when I heard his last cry suddenly  
Abruptly they appeared oh so quickly  
The monster's servants when he had not yet died  
Ardently calling out his famous slogans  
Filthy signs of their enormous indignation  
Pushing me to the ground tearing my robe  
Which I put up with like a good Norman woman  
Like a martyr I should say it doesn't matter  
Details the rabble will know by now  
And later will be confused with heroism  
Among so many other things that speak of our pride  
Our dignity in survival  
Judge me for yourselves I who wait only for death  
May it be as I imagine a happy journey  
To a better place more beautiful and worthy  
Than here where life is not worth its name  
Now leave me in peace let Simone leave now  
Later you will return to insult me to avenge yourselves  
Before they come to take me to the abbey

Let me listen with joy to my sentence  
Don't beat me Simone I promise not to abandon you  
Before you punish me leaving my back marked  
By your fingernails your teeth woman turned into a fury  
Whose bandages will you put on now  
Who will you be faithful to  
Augur of my death you will say good-bye to me  
Spitting on me as if to crown me  
Good-bye your Honor gentlemen of the jury  
May no one doubt or hesitate  
I Charlotte killed the way I needed to  
The right way

*Translated from the Spanish by Daniel Balderston and Christopher Merrill*